

OBSERVATION OF A MALE PAINTED HONEYEATER ON THE FLEURIEU PENINSULA.

The Painted Honeyeater *Grantiella picta* inhabits forest and woodland in eastern Australia mainly on the inland slopes of the Great Dividing Range from Victoria to northern Queensland. The species is listed as rare in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia while being recorded as an occasional visitor in the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory (Garnett 1992a). Its natural scarcity is attributed to competition with the Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum* but any long term population decline is likely due to clearance and degradation of the honeyeater's breeding habitat (Garnett 1992b).

Breeding generally occurs south of 26°S from November to February, and the bird migrates north into Queensland and the Northern Territory for the winter.

The Painted Honeyeater is said to feed mainly on mistletoe berries. Nectar forms part of the diet, and insects are gleaned from foliage or caught by flycatching behaviour (Longmore 1991). This bird is nomadic in habit, probably due to its high dependence on mistletoe berries (Blakers *et al.* 1984; Emison *et al.* 1987; Longmore 1991).

In South Australia this species has been recorded at Curdimurka in the Far North (30°31'S, 137°06'E) in May 1970 (Lendon 1970). This record is unsubstantiated as no description of the bird was given. The first substantiated record was made in April 1978 near Bool Lagoon in the South East (37°07'S, 140°42'E) by Moorhouse (1979). A sighting on the Strzelecki Track in the North East was made 12.3 km S of Merty Merty Station (28°35'S, 140°15'E) in June 1980 (Matheson 1981). Another Painted Honeyeater was observed 3 km NE of Pitcairn HS in the Lower North (32°56'S, 139°17'E) in April 1984 (Woodcock 1985). The last sighting occurred in the North East, near the Cannuwaukaninna dune 16 km WSW of Etudanna homestead (28°45'S, 138°28'E) in August 1984 (McNamara 1986).

This note reports a Painted Honeyeater observed at 1200 h on 8 June 1997 in the garden of John and Wendy Threlfall's property, *Timber Creek*, on the southern boundary of Cox's Scrub Conservation Park (35°20'S, 138°45'E) on the Fleurieu Peninsula. The bird was observed by three people for approximately 20 minutes. This

is the fifth substantiated record for the State.

DESCRIPTION

The bird was approximately the size of the Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters *Meliphaga ornatus* which were quite prevalent in the area at the time. A Yellow-plumed Honeyeater was observed chasing the Painted Honeyeater for a short period. The latter's plumage was a striking black above and white below with black splashes on its flank. The white extended from its wing, high along its neck to the base of its beak. The feathers on the shoulder of the wing were edged with white. It had a distinctive pink bill, a white ear patch and dark legs while the primary feathers and side of the tail were bright yellow. Several features, such as the black plumage and white ear patch, indicate it was a male.

The bird was first seen in an almond tree *Prunus dulcis* at approximately 1200 h but was not identified as a Painted Honeyeater until it flew into a small mulberry tree *Morus* sp. (2 m in height) where it remained for approximately 30 seconds. At this stage Wendy Threlfall and I were only 2 m from the bird and had a superb view as it hopped around the bare branches of the tree. The bird then flew off into a pear tree *Pyrus communis*. A pair of binoculars was obtained and the bird was followed around the garden for about 15 minutes. The bird was observed mainly in the bare branches of fruit trees in the garden including the almond, mulberry and pear trees as well as a flowering sweet cherry *Prunus avium* and an apricot tree *Prunus armeniaca*. It appeared to be feeding in the almond and pear trees where it spent most of its time moving around the bare branches, occasionally pecking at them, presumably gleaning insects. Although we inspected the trees no obvious food source could be found. The bird was also observed perched in a brown stringybark *Eucalyptus baxteri* for a short period. It was later observed sitting on the gutter of the house before flying to the bird bath, having a quick wash and then flying to a brown stringybark approximately 40 m away. At this stage the bird was also observed by my husband, Ian. This was the last time the bird was seen. Further searches by other bird observers and the owners of the property have met with no success. The bird was not heard calling at any stage during the sighting.

The property *Timber Creek* is situated on the

southern boundary of Cox's Scrub Conservation Park, which varies from open scrub through to tall open shrubland. The dominant overstorey consists of cup gum *Eucalyptus cosmophylla* and pink gum *E. fasciculosa* as well as brown stringybark (Neagle 1995). Timber Creek has remnant patches of scrub but has very little mistletoe. The only species of mistletoe identified was box mistletoe *Amyema miquelii* growing on the brown stringybarks. The few that were found had almost finished flowering and had developed some green fruit at the time of the sighting.

This sighting appears to be somewhat unusual in that the bird was not observed at heavy mistletoe infestations, instead it apparently was gleaning insects from fruit trees in a domestic garden. It is also the most south-westerly of any of the records in South Australia. Interestingly this sighting coincided with an unusual influx of Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters into the Mount Lofty Ranges. They were prevalent in the Cox's Scrub area at the time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank David Edey, Penny Paton and my husband Ian for their assistance in the preparation of this report, and John and Wendy Threlfall for allowing Ian and myself as well as

other bird observers access to their property.

REFERENCES

- Blakers, M., Davies, S.J.J.F. and Reilly, P.N. 1984. *The atlas of Australian birds*. RAOU and Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Emison W.B., Beardsell C.M., Norman F.I., Lyon R.H. and Bennett S.C. 1987. *Atlas of Victorian birds*. Department of Conservation, Forests & Lands and the RAOU, Melbourne.
- Garnett, S. 1992a. *The action plan for Australian birds*. RAOU and Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Melbourne.
- Garnett, S. 1992b. *Threatened and extinct birds of Australia*. RAOU and Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Melbourne.
- Lendon, D. 1970. A sight record of the Painted Honeyeater. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 25, 194.
- Longmore, W. 1991. *Honeyeaters and their allies of Australia*. Angus and Robertson, UK.
- Matheson, W.E. 1981. Records of the Painted Honeyeater in South Australia. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 28, 184-5.
- McNamara, J.A. 1986. Painted Honeyeater in north-eastern South Australia. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 30, 21.
- Moorhouse, R. 1979. Bird notes. *SAOA Newsletter*, 92, 17.
- Neagle, N. 1995. *An update of the conservation status of the major plant associations of South Australia*. Native Vegetation Conservation Section, Department of Environment and Natural Resources, South Australia.
- Woodcock, K. 1985. Sighting of a Painted Honeyeater in South Australia's Lower North. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 29, 220.

D. Hopton: PO Box 56, Ashbourne, S.A. 5157

Received: 29 August 1997